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ABSTRACT

An Afro-American literature course was established at Chicago City College to present a survey of writers who reflected the Black experience in America and to examine their works as artistic entities in their historical and sociological context. Background lectures on many aspects of Afro-American literature accompanied studies of material grouped historically within genres--(1) the prose study focused on folklore--American tales with African origins, essays, novels, and short stories; (2) the drama study included readings and discussions interspersed with the use of audio-visual aids and the presentation of a one-act play; and (3) the poetry study examined poets from the Reconstruction through the Harlem Renaissance to contemporary times. Student reactions were generally favorable, with those students who had been reluctant to read in remedial English contributing enthusiastically. (A reading list is included.) (JM)

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Teaching Afro-American Literature

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It was with much the same feeling as that expressed in these[1] two poems that my colleague Charles Evans and I introduced a course in Afro-American Literature at Southeast City College in September, 1968. The purpose of the course was to expose many of the overlooked truths in American literature — the vast contributions of Black American writers.

Because of the anticipated response to the course, two sections were offered — one early in the day, the other at night. Mr. Evans and I worked the entire summer developing the course. I would like to present here my experiences in teaching Afro-American Literature while looking at (1) the objectives of the course; (2) the content around which the course was centered; (3) the presentation of material; and (4) the students and their reactions.

The title of the course is Afro-American Literature. Its objectives are threefold: (1) to present a general survey of the works of Black writers who responded to or reflected on the Black man's experience; (2) to examine the works as artistic entities; and (3) to look at the works in the context of their historical and sociological significance.

As a general survey course, Afro-American Literature exposes the prose, poetry, and drama of Black writers who, from the colonial period to the present, have responded to or reflected on the Black man's experiences in America. Thus the course does not study Black writers who have not dealt particularly with the Black experience or with works *about* Black people written by non-Black writers.

An attempt is made to examine the writers' particular techniques — to see how one writer may be more concerned with character development, while another concentrates more on creating environmental influences; to make some general observations about stylistic differences between the early nineteenth century story and those written later; to see the differences in eighteenth century poetry and poetry written today.

Works are studied from the point of view of the historical and sociological settings in which they were written. For example, we look at Margaret Walker's novel *Jubilee* as something more than the struggles of Elvira Dutton during the Civil War years. We ponder the reactions to Langston Hughes' short story "One Friday Morning," the time in which it was written, and the reactions it would receive today.

Deciding on the objectives of the course was an easier project than was limiting the material for the content of the course. The list of required reading might appear to be overwhelming at first,

[1] The two poems referred to above are Carolyn Rogers, "You Name It," Paper Soul (Chicago: Third World Press, 1968), and Ted Joans, "The Truth," Black Pow-wow (New York: Hill and Wang, Inc., 1969). For ERIC reproduction, they have been removed from the article because permission to reproduce

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but with tight scheduling, intensive reading, participation and cooperation of the students, it was possible to cover the material. Since this was to be a survey course, it was decided that the students would be exposed to as many representative works as possible.

There were many Black writers whose names the students had heard but whose works they had not read. They knew of Richard Wright and *Native Son,* but many had not read the novel. In a class of thirty-five, two had read the novel before it was assigned; one, just the previous semester in a survey literature course. They knew of Ralph Ellison and *The Invisible Man,* and they were quick to use the expression that the Black man is an invisible man. But many had not read the novel. They knew of James Baldwin, and they had read a number of his works. However, most of the students had not read *Go Tell It on the Mountain.* They had heard of Gwendolyn Brooks, and many knew that she is the poet laureate of Illinois. But few knew that she had written a novel and several short stories. Yet basing the course solely on the names with which the students were already familia would not have fulfilled its objectives.

There were even more Black writers whose names the students had never heard, but basing the course on these writers alone would also have been an injustice. So we attempted to read as many of the standard works — *Native Son, Invisible Man, Go Tell It on the Mountain* — while reading works by writers — such as Willis Richardson, Georgia Johnson, Jean Toomer, Paula Marshall, and Rudolph Fisher — who were less well known to the students.

At first there was a problem of getting all the books we wanted to use at a minimum of expense to the students. Since then several of the books which we bought in hard covers have been published in paperback.

In order to keep the expense to a minimum, we used several approaches:

1. We wrote to publishers asking for discounts on both paperback and hardcover books. The publishers were all very accommodating, and we were able to have five-dollar packets for the students. The packets allowed the students to save quite a bit of what they would have spent purchasing the books separately. Each packet contained *Native Son,* by Richard Wright; *Go Tell It on the Mountain,* by James Baldwin; *Jubilee,* by Margaret Walker; *Maud Martha,* by Gwendolyn Brooks; *American Negro Short Stories,* edited

(continued from page 2)
them was not granted by the publishers and authors.

by John Henrik Clarke; and *A Raisin in the Sun,* by Lorraine Hansberry.

2. Mr. Evans and I purchased some of the books and loaned them to the students for the semester. These included the April, 1968, drama edition of *Negro Digest* and the plays *Happy Ending* and *Days of Absence,* by Douglas Turner Ward.
3. The more expensive books were put on reserve in the library. *Best Short Stories by Negro Writers,* edited by Langston Hughes, then in hardcover for $7.95, and *Cane,* by Jean Toomer, then in hardcover for $4.00, are examples. Since that time, *Best Short Stories* has come out in paperback for $2.95, and *Cane* is now available in paperback for $.95.
4. Many of the materials were reproduced and given to the students.

Assignments were given enough in advance that the student could avail himself of these services. If a student was interested in buying his own copy — and many were — we ordered it from the publisher at a discount.

After deciding the objectives and overcoming the problem of availability of books at a minimum expense, the presentation of the course began. Because there was so much to cover — this was probably the students' first acquaintance with the Black writers, perhaps for some the last, at least in classroom presentation — the easiest way to give the students a sense of perspective and to give me a sense of direction was to group the material by genre and to look at the historial development within each genre. Most of the classes evolved through student discussion. However, especially at the beginning of the course and periodically throughout, it was necessary to give lectures on the background of many aspects of Afro-American literature.

The first genre to be presented was prose, which was divided into folklore, essays, novels, and short stories. The discussion of folklore was brief, its main purpose being to show the origin of Afro-American literature. We looked at how our literature is based on oral tradition, not by choice but by law. Though the slaves had been forbidden by law to learn to read and write, they could not be forbidden to recall their African tales and to use their creative imaginations to combine these tales with their experiences in America. Thus, we have been provided with a rich backdrop of Afro-American folktales — American tales with African origins. We discussed the multiple purposes for which the tales

were used. It was then that the students realized that the protest theme began quite early. We also recounted some of the characteristics of the Afro-American folktales. The discussion hopefully prepared the students for much of the fiction that is based either on the themes or style of the folktale.

Following the discussion of folktales, we briefly looked at the autobiographical form from the eighteenth century to the present, and though we did not read any in class, the students were encouraged to read many of the autobiographies in *Black Voices,* edited by Abraham Chapman.

It was with a discussion of petition literature that the study of selected essays began. We started with excerpts from David Walker's Appeal in 1829; then we read Frederick Douglass' Fourth of July Address in 1852, Booker T. Washington's Atlanta Exposition Address in 1895, W. E. B. DuBois' rebuttal in "On Booker T. Washington" from the book *Souls of Black Folk,* and Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream." The students were surprised that the early essays have as much relevance today as they did years ago.

The discussions of folklore and the essays gave the students time to get a good start on reading the novels: *Native Son, Invisible Man, Jubilee, Go Tell It on the Mountain,* and *Maud Martha.* For the discussion of novels, the students formed panels in which they determined the areas of discussion. For example, the *Native Son* panel studied the motivations of the characters, looked closely at Chicago at the time the story took place, discussed Wright's use of symbols, indicated similarities to Wright's life as reflected in *Black Boy.* One student who had read *The American Tragedy* pointed out to the class many similarities in the two novels.

The students' reactions to the selections were varied.

Native Son was well received. Though many agreed that they did not know any Bigger Thomases, they became greatly incensed with a society that could create even one Bigger.

Invisible Man was difficult to read. Students came to class with the decided opinion that they did not like the book. But after asking questions, struggling with their own answers, looking a little closer at the scenes, and tying things together, they decided that they liked the book after all.

Go Tell It on the Mountain had the greatest emotional effect on the students. Up to this time, the students were a little reticent to bring in personal experiences, and preferred to stick to the texts.

But something happened when they read this novel that made them become very honest about their own feelings and experiences.

Jubilee was read with the greatest enthusiasm. Many did outside research on the historical background. Several students decided to show Margaret Walker's high degree of selectivity in choosing each epigraph preceding each chapter and many times explained Biblical allusions. This process became a little trying since there are fifty-eight chapters, but I was glad to see that they had read the novel carefully.

Maud Martha was positively received by only a few students. Some objected because they could not follow the story; others objected to the character of Maud because she brought too many things on herself.

Before beginning a discussion of short stories, we discussed the problem of early short-story writers, who had to rely on magazine publication, and the double problem of the Black short-story writers, who, in addition, had to write for a dual audience. The texts for the short story included *Best Short Stories by Negro Writers,* edited by Langston Hughes; *American Negro Short Stories,* edited by John Henrik Clarke; and *Cane* by Jean Toomer.

The students read from four to five short stories at a time. To add some unity to the discussion, the stories were significantly grouped. For example, the first group consisted of early short-story writers. Other groups included stories dealing with children's reactions to racial barriers ("Overcoat," by John P. Davis; "Boy Who Painted Christ Black," by John Henrik Clarke; "One Friday Morning," by Langston Hughes), writers' portrayals of Black women (selections from *Cane,* by Jean Toomer; "Reena," by Paula Marshall; "Sarah," by Martin Hammer), soldiers' reactions to America, and the question of a Black man's manhood. Again as with the novel, the discussions were initiated by a panel. Then the panel presented questions to the class. The students were quick to question another student's interpretation.

After short stories, we began a discussion of drama. The section on drama exposed the students to a variety of possibilities of the dramatic form. We read *The Chip Woman's Fortune* (1923), by Willis Richardson, not so much because of its excellence as a play, but because it was the first play by a Negro to be presented on Broadway. *Plumes* (1927), a folk tragedy by Georgia Douglas Johnson, shows the danger of depending upon superstition for medical help. *Funny House of a Negro* (1964), by Adrienne Kennedy, is a real experiment in theatre. Written during a theatre

workshop, it is open to a wide variety of interpretations. Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* was also studied.

To add another dimension to the study of drama, to provide the change of pace which was by now needed in the class discussion, and to give the students a break in reading assignments, audio-visual aids were used intermittently. One day we saw *The Game,* a twenty-minute film based on a play by George Horton Bass. The actors — teen-agers who live in the New York ghetto — act out a number of children's games. The film invites a stimulating discussion made up of attempts to analyze the dramatist's purpose. It is also interesting to discuss the rather unique film techniques used.

Another day in class, some of the students used a sort of readers' theatre form to present the one-act play *Happy Ending,* by Douglas Turner Ward. After the presentation, the actors answered questions about their parts and posed questions to the class.

Also during the course, we saw *The Weapons of Gordon Parks,* a thirty-minute film featuring Gordon Parks' famous photographs (many of which have appeared in *Life* magazine), sections from his autobiography *Choice of Weapons,* and music which he composed and plays.

By this time the semester was coming to an end, and we finished the course with a study of poetry. Selections were taken from *American Negro Poetry,* edited by Arna Bontemps; *Poetry of the Negro,* edited by Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps; *Black Voices,* edited by Abraham Chapman; and the annual poetry issue of *Negro Digest,* September–October 1968.

We discussed poetry by looking at the eighteenth century poets (Phillis Wheatley, Jupiter Hammon, George Horton), poets during the period of Reconstruction to Rennaissance (Paul Lawrence Dunbar, James Weldon Johnson, Fenton Johnson), those of the Harlem Rennaissance (Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes), and contemporary poets (Margaret Walker, Naomi Madgett, Dudley Randall, Don Lee, Carolyn Rodgers).

I am sure one of the reactions to the course is that too much was undertaken. Well, let us look at the kind of student who took the course. The first day of class a questionnaire was given to the students to determine how much Afro-American literature they had read and to see if they had had any literature courses or English 101 or 102. Their exposure to Afro-American literature was limited. Many said that they had read *Manchild in the Promised Land,* by Claude Brown; *Autobiography of Malcolm X;* and

In Another Country, by James Baldwin. Very few had taken other literature courses. Some had not had any English courses, while many had been required to take remedial English before proceeding into English 101. In fact, there were several students whom I had taught in remedial English courses and English 101 whom I could hardly get to read one essay, let alone a novel. But somehow, in this course, these very same students often finished the reading assignments ahead of time and made significant contributions to the class.

Some students came to the class thinking it would be a Black-power talk session without a lot of work, without basing discussions on concrete ideas from assignments. These students were soon disillusioned. Though they did not keep up with the assignments, they continued to come to class. Some students objected to reading only about the Black man's experience in America and would like to have read Black writers' stories which did not deal particularly with Black themes. Of course, many complained about the amount of work, saying they had never read so much in their lives. But they stayed, and they did the work. Thirty-five students registered for the course; thirty-four remained at the end of the semester.

Perhaps my overenthusiasm for the course led me to be too idealistic in my expectation, but perhaps this idealism was good for it showed, at least in this instance, what even poor students can do if they are interested. Perhaps the required reading list should have been shorter so we could have analyzed more carefully every passage, character, allusion, and implication. But when a student's background has been limited in a particular subject, and there is only one semester in which to whet his appetite, I think one of the best ways is to give an almost infinite range of possibilities for future study.

These are the experiences I have had in teaching Afro-American literature, the objectives I have tried to fulfill, the material I thought was important and interesting, and the kinds of students I taught. If there are any suggestions or reactions, I would appreciate hearing them.

In the words of Claude McKay, with whose quotation I begin my Afro-American literature course: "Getting down to our native roots and building up from our own people is not savagery. It is culture."[2] It is my hope that in giving the students an introduction to the rich cultural contributions by Black writers to

[2]Robert Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven, Connecticut: The Yale University Press, 1958), p. 51.

American literature, they are exposed to the number of possibilities for far more extensive study.

AFRO-AMERICAN LITERATURE READING LIST

SOUTHEAST CITY COLLEGE

I. Prose

A. Essays

1. Walker, David. "Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular and Very Expressly to Those of the United States," *Black Power Revolt,* edited by Floyd B. Barbour. Massachusetts: Extending Horizons Books, 1968.
2. Douglas, Frederick. "Fourth of July Address (1852), *Negro Orators and Their Orations,* edited by Carter Godwin Woodson. Washington: Associated Press Publishers, Inc., 1925.
3. Washington, Booker T. "Atlanta Exposition Address," *Up from Slavery. Three Negro Classics: Up from Slavery, Souls of Black Folk, Autobiography of an Ex–Colored Man.* New York: Avon Books, Discus, 1968.
4. DuBois, W. E. B. "On Booker T. Washington," *Souls of Black Folk. Three Negro Classics: Up from Slavery, Souls of Black Folk, Autobiography of an Ex–Colored Man.* New York: Avon Books, Discus, 1968.
5. King, Martin Luther. "I Have a Dream," *Dolphin Book of Speeches,* edited by George W. Hibbitt. New York: Doubleday Company, Dolphin Books, 1965.
6. Chapman, Abraham, ed. "Black Voices." *An Anthology of Afro-American Literature.* New York: New American Library, Mentor Books, 1968.

B. Novels

1. Baldwin, James. *Go Tell It on the Mountain.* New York: Dell Publishing, 1953.
2. Brooks, Gwendolyn. *Maud Martha.* New York: Popular Library, 1953.
3. Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man.* Signet. New York: New American Library, 1952.
4. Wright, Richard. *Native Son.* Classic, New York: Harper and Row, Perennial, 1940.

C. Short Stories

1. Clarke, John Henrik, ed. *American Negro Short Stories.* American Century Series. New York: Hill and Wang, 1966.
2. Hughes, Langston, ed. *Best Short Stories by Negro Writers.* Massachusetts: Little, Brown and Co., 1967.
3. Toomer, Jean. *Cane.* New York: Harper and Row, 1969.

II. Drama

A. Hansberry, Lorraine. *Raisin in the Sun* in *Raisin in the Sun/The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window.* Signet. New York: New American Library, 1966.

B. Richardson, Willis. *Chip Woman's Fortune* in *Anthology of the American Negro in the Theatre: A Critical Approach.* Edited by Lindsay Patterson. International Library of Negro Life and History Series. New York: Publishers Company, Inc., 1968, pp. 89–98.

C. Kennedy, Adrienne. *Funny House of a Negro* in *Anthology of the American Negro in the Theatre: A Critical Approach.* Edited by Lindsay Patterson. International Library of Negro Life and History Series. New York: Publishers Company, Inc., 1968, pp. 281–290.

D. Johnson, Georgia Douglas. *Plumes. Anthology of American Negro Literature.* Edited by Sylvestre Cornelius Watkins. New York: Modern Library, 1944.

E. Ward, Douglas Turner. *Happy Ending* and *Days of Absence, Two Plays.* New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1966.

III. Poetry

A. Bontemps, Arna, ed. *American Negro Poetry.* American Century Series. New York: Hill and Wang, 1963.

B. Hughes, Langston, and Bontemps, Arna, eds. *Poetry of the Negro.* New York: Doubleday and Company, 1949.

C. Annual Poetry Issue: Black Poets and Their Publications. *Negro Digest* 17:11–12 (September–October 1968).